

Indian Rose Annual - IRA 1993

A Search for Rosa Clinophylla

M. S. Viraraghavan

In a very interesting chapter in his classic book 'Climbing for Old and New', the well known English rosarian and horticulturist, Graham Stuart Thomas, has dealt, in intriguing detail, with what he calls 'the mystery of the musk rose' (*Rosa moschata*). Judged by what various authorities have to say, *Rosa clinophylla* (*R. involucrata*) seems to be an even more mysterious creature. The distinctive characteristics of the species seem to vary considerably, as also the locations where it can be found, which lie scattered all over India, with no apparent logical connection to each other.

Sir George Watt, who was the Surveyor General of India in the last two decades of the 20th century, and was in addition a very keen botanist, has made these observations in an unpublished diary of his explorations in Manipur during 1882¹. *Rosa involucrata* is "common along the sandy margins of rivers which traverse the valley of Manipur proper, especially around the city, the Indian distribution of this rose is somewhat remarkable". In his Himalayan Journal, Sir J. D. Hooker points out its extraordinary occurrence in the jungles of eastern Bengal, intermixed with palms and other tropical plants and thus living on alluvial soils. "Some years ago I came upon it in great profusion within the valleys of the Rajmahal Hills", (a hill range in Bihar, located west of Asansol in West Bengal and north of Ranchi) "luxuriating under conditions so very different from those of eastern and northern Bengal that its presence there seemed unaccountable but the dry soil and high temperature of Rajmahal is so

different from the inundated swampy plains of Bengal. I suspect that there may be two species at least commonly placed under the present name, the one the swamp loving, the other the dry soil plant. In some respects, the Manipur form is suggestive of a third, that comes near to *Rosa Bracteata*".

"The assemblage of wild roses of tropical (or perhaps sub-tropical) India is an important one nevertheless, and Col. D. Prain refers to *R. involucrata* to three varieties (which perhaps meets the case) but to these should be added *R. lyelli*, an even still more mountainous form, their representative in the lower N. W. Himalayas and from thence to Rajputana and South India. Where met with, the plants, usually regarded as *Involucrata*, are plentiful enough, but between one locality and another a gap of many thousands of square miles may interpose over which the plant seems to possess no inclination to spread; e.g. on passing north east from Sylhet" (now in Bangla Desh) "it disappears and on the road from thence via Cachar to Manipur - a distance of over 120 miles in a direct line - it is nowhere met with until the valley of Manipur proper is reached, when, at altitudes of from 2,500 to 4,000 feet, what I have suggested as being possibly the Chinese form in the assemblage is found, not only plentiful but, I might almost say, characteristic. This sudden appearance and disappearance in Eastern Bengal is that which the species everywhere manifests throughout its Indian area".

From this, the reader can infer that, if there is a mystery about *R. moschata*, the musk rose, there is a much more complex one with *R. clinophylla*.

The distinctions set out by Sir George Watt, in the various forms of *R. clinophylla* have been examined by various taxonomists, with, as could

be expected, differing conclusions. One of the more recent papers on the subject is the one by Smt. Chhabi Ghora and G. Panigrahi^a, entitled "Taxonomic delineation within the *R. clinophylla* Complex" published, curiously enough, in The Journal of Japanese Botany, February 1985, where *R. clinophylla* has been divided into two species, *R. clinophylla* proper (with two additional varieties) and *R. lyelli*. In other words, according to this paper, *R. clinophylla* in India, is in three forms - *R. clinophylla* itself, *R. clinophylla* var. *parvifolia* (i. e. small leaved form) and *R. clinophylla* var. *glabra* (i.e. hairless form but with larger leaves.) *R. lyelli* is held to be a different species but from a horticulturist's point of view, the main differences are slight indeed, consisting mainly of the thorns pointing downward, as against the slightly upward pointing thorns in the *clinophylla* group.

But this article is written mainly from the horticulturist's point of view, and I cannot resist the conclusion that all the four forms are horticulturally not too different from each other. However, one very interesting difference between the *clinophylla* forms and *lyelli* is that, whereas *clinophylla* generally produces solitary flowers, *lyelli* flowers in corymbs. But on the whole, I am inclined to follow Sir J. D. Hooker who observed that he could not distinguish *R. clinophylla* from *R. lyelli*, and, following Hooker, *R. lyelli* is treated as part of the *R. clinophylla* group in this article.

For those of who are interested, I furnish in the Appendix³ what Ghora and Panigrahi consider to be the salient differences between the two species, but it should be noted that, even these authors consider *R. lyelli* to be a member of the same section, Bracteatae, in Rosa, which, according to them comprises three species - *R. bracteata*, *R. clinophylla* and *R. lyelli*.

While there is a considerable overlap of the areas where these roses occur, broadly speaking, *R. clinophylla* var. *glabra* seems to be the most tropical form (found mainly in Bengal, and adjoining regions at low altitudes), and *R. lyelli* the most mountainous form, found in places such as Dehradun, in the foothills of the Himalayas, Mount Abu (Rajasthan), Coorg (Karnataka) and, possibly, in the northern portion of the Eastern Ghats in the Visakhapatnam District of Andhra Pradesh.

Before concluding this part, I would like to stress that the above two forms are horticulturally the most desirable as they have the largest leaves and flowers.

As Dr. N.C. Sen, the well known rosarian from West Bengal has observed, it will be a great advantage to rose hybridists if the various forms of *R. clinophylla* and *R. lyelli* could be gathered at one place.

With this object in mind I have been trying to locate the various types of the species and grow them in Kodaikanal. The first member of the group which could be obtained was a plant of *clinophylla* from near Ranchi, collected by Mr. Narendra Singh of Ranchi. This is probably *R. clinophylla* var. *parvifolia*.

In the publication 'Threatened Plants of India'⁴, published by the Botanical Survey of India (B.S.I.) there is a reference to *R. clinophylla* getting scarce in Mount Abu. On seeing this it occurred to me that priority should be given to collecting this before it disappears. And, as luck would have it, the 1992 Rose Convention was held at Baroda, which is quite near Abu. One more important reason for collecting this variant is that it represents the western most point of the area of distribution of *R. clinophylla* complex in India, situated not too far from the border between Gujarat State and Pakistan.

So a trip to Mount Abu was planned immediately after the Baroda Convention. Earlier we had got in touch with some good friends in the Rajasthan administration and the Forest Department, as well as the B.S.I., Western Circle (headquarters Jodhpur).

Mount Abu lies at a distance of about 150 kms, approximately north of Ahmedabad and is a hill station at an altitude of about 4000 feet, with a highest point, Guru Shikar around 5600'. (Incidentally, the highest point in the plains of India between the Himalayas and the Western Ghats)

Starting from Ahmedabad one morning we reached Mount Abu by afternoon, and straightaway set out to look for *R. clinophylla*. We had the good fortune to be accompanied by some officers of the State Forest Department, as well as the enthusiastic Dr. P. J. Parmar of the B.S.T., author of the Flora of Rajasthan. At first the task seemed very easy, as one of the forest guards said that wild roses were quite common all around Abu-and he knew a place where it could be found, and, in no time we reached this spot - about 20 kms from Abu, but we were in for a disappointment as the plants proved to be just *R. multiflora*, which had apparently been planted by the Forest Dept. at various places on the roadside sometime back.

We slowly retraced our steps and stopped at what we thought were likely places, i.e., by the side of streams and lakes, but we could not find anything even remotely resembling a rose, even after covering a fair amount of ground. So, quite dejected we returned to the Forest Bungalow where we were staying.

The main handicap was that we had no precise information regarding where exactly the rose could be found, unlike our earlier expedition to Ukhrul in Manipur, in search of *R. gigantea* (an account of

which appeared in 'Rose News' sometime back).

The next morning we again set forth looking for likely places, going up to the top of Guru Shikar, but not a trace of the rose. Feeling very crestfallen, we returned and, as it happened, one of the forest guards got the bright idea of stopping a villager we passed whom he knew, and asked him about the rose. Roop Singh, the villager, was at first puzzled, because, as we realised, the Hindi language word for 'rose', namely, 'gulab' invariably suggests to the layman, a pink flowered rose, as gulab means pink, whereas what we were looking for was the white rose. We tried to explain this, and suddenly Roop Singh perked up and said, "Oh ! you mean 'kuza'" and told us he knew where it could be found. We were not certain that he meant our rose. It was also getting fairly late in the evening, but overcoming his protests, we bundled him into the jeep, and off we left for Oriya village, and there, to our huge delight, we found the rose, extensively planted as hedges around farmers fields, situated just above a lake. But not a trace of flower or fruit could we find.

Back again the next morning, we had a real stroke of luck when we discovered a stem bearing a cluster of flowers. As often happens, one discovery led to another, and soon we came across a number of flowers on a plant which had climbed the top of a tree nearby, on a hedgerow. Having collected a fair amount of cuttings we returned in triumph to the Forest Bungalow, where a detailed comparison of the characteristics with the literature brought by Dr. Parmar confirmed that we had indeed got *R. clinophylla*. Yippee!!!

Curiously enough, though we spent two more days in Mount Abu we could not locate the plant in the wild and all that could be found were the roses planted in hedges in Oriya village, which were apparently in some

danger of extinction as the hedges are being replaced by stonewalls by the farmers.

On the day before we left Mt. Abu we went again to Oriya village and took several specimens and also several photographs of the area, and plants. We were lucky to locate a few smaller plants nearer the waters of the lake, but even these appeared to be suckers rather than seedlings, and we collected a few. In spite of intensive search we could not find any seed and the local farmers told us that they propagate the rose by cuttings and never by seed.

As seen at Mt. Abu, *R. clinophylla* (*lyelli*) is a very long lived plant. Several of the plants in the hedges had bases 8" to 9" thick with gnarled treelike bark. Some of the specimens were 15' high and along a village path we found several in bloom with clusters of very attractive flowers, considerably larger than the Ranchi form which I had mentioned earlier.

Subsequently, we found to our surprise that we had collected this rose at exactly the same point where a George King had found it as far back as 1868! ⁵.

It was quite clear that the rose was in grave danger of extinction. Earlier on, apparently, it could be found in several places around Mt. Abu, even next to the Forest Bungalow, where we were staying (and which had a lake beside it).

So, armed with several cuttings, budsticks and suckers of the rose, we returned to Kodaikanal. Out of nearly 100 cuttings, not one succeeded, but rooted suckers have survived, as well as two of the budeyes, budded on *R. multiflora*. By now (October 1992) the biggest plant is 5' tall with several basal shoots, looking as could be expected, much happier in the cold climate of Kodaikanal, than the Ranchi clone.

Interestingly enough, we notice subsequently, that the same rose called 'kuza' in Abu, was referred to as 'kuzia' in the Doon Valley, as stated by Firminger in "Gardening in India").⁶

The Abu form of *clinophylla* is now being re-introduced in the wild, with the enthusiastic cooperation of the Rajasthan Forest Department in suitable areas around Mt. Abu: As seen in Kodaikanal it is quite a beautiful plant with lovely glossy leaves and, hopefully, it will contribute to the development of good roses for India.

REFERENCES :

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Thacker, Spink & Co,

APPENDIX:

The two species are distinguished here as follows:

- Ia.** Prickles pointed upwards. Leaflets eglandular on midrib and pale beneath, apex obtuse or rounded, margin closely securaic. Hypanthia and pedicels eglandular. Flowers usually solitary, sometimes in cluster. Sepals entire *R. clinophylla*

- Ib.** Prickles pointed downwards. Leaflets glandular on midrib and glaucous beneath, apex acute, margin distantly serrate. Hypanthia slightly glandular, pedicels distinctly glandular. Flowers in corymbs, 3-7 together. Sepals with few appendages *R. lyelli*

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Sir George Watt, who was the Surveyor General of India in the last two decades of the previous century, and was in addition a very keen botanist, has made these observations in an unpublished diary of his explorations in Manipur during 1882¹. *Rosa Involucrata* is "common along the sandy margins of rivers which traverse the valley of Manipur proper, especially around the city.....the Indian distribution of this rose is somewhat remarkable. In his Himalayan journal, Sir J. D. Hooker points out its extraordinary occurrence in the jungles of Eastern Bengal, intermixed with palms and other tropical plants and thus living on alluvial soils. Some years ago I came upon it in great profusion within the valleys of the Rajmahal Hills" (a hill range in Bihar, located west of Asansol in West Bengal and north of Ranchi) "luxuriating under conditions so very different from those of eastern and northern Bengal that its presence there seemed unaccountable.....but the dry soil and high temperature of Rajmahal is so different from the inundated swampy plains of Bengal, I suspect that there may be two spe-

Hillview, Fernhill Road, Kodaikanal-624 101, Tamil Nadu.

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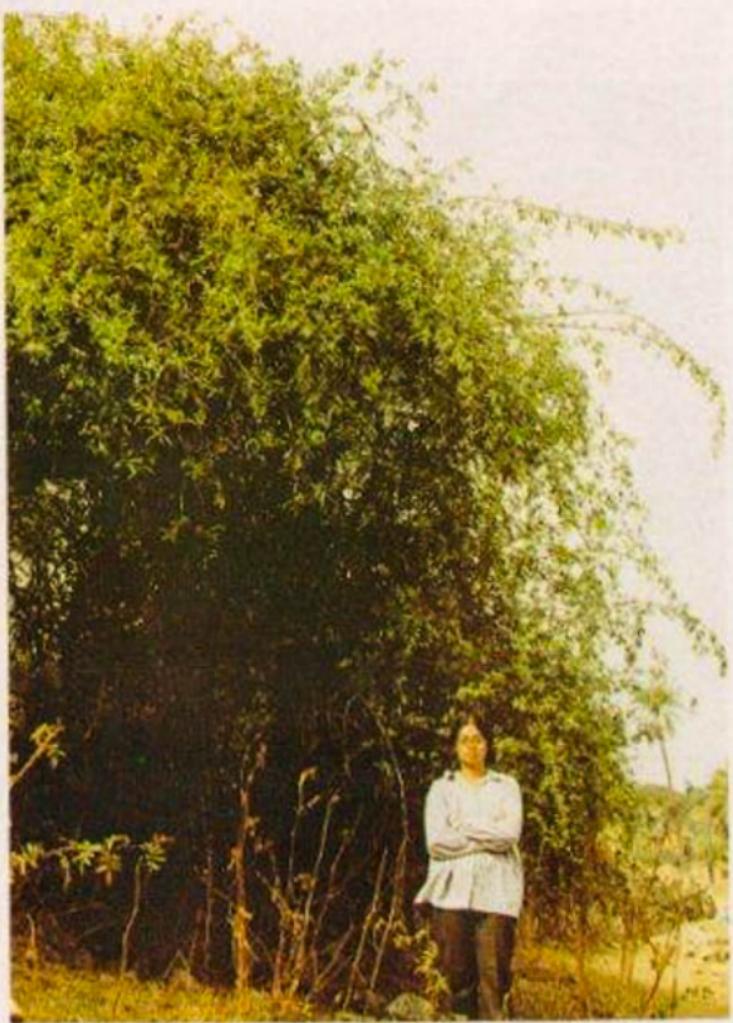
"The assemblage of wild roses of tropical (or perhaps sub-tropical) India is an important one nevertheless, and Col. D. Prain refers to *R. Involucrata* to three varieties (which perhaps meets the case) but the these should be added *R. Lyelli*, an even still more mountainous form, their representative in the lower N. W. Himalayas and from thence to Rajputana and South India. Where met with, the plants, usually regarded as *Involucrata*, are plentiful enough, but between one locality and another a gap of many thousands of square miles may interpose over which the plant seems to possess no inclination to spread; e.g. on passing north east from Sylhet" (now in Bangla Desh) "it disappears and on the road from thence via Cachar to Manipur—a distance of over 120 miles in a direct line—it is nowhere met with until the valley of Manipur proper is reached, when, at altitudes of from 2,500 to 4,000 feet, what I have suggested as being possibly the Chinese form in the assemblage is found, not only plentiful but, I might almost say, characteristic. This sudden appearance and disappearance in Eastern Bengal is that which the species everywhere manifests throughout its Indian area".

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R. Clinophylla, Mount Abu form, photographed in the wild, January 1992.



Bush of *R. Clinophylla*, Mount Abu form, growing on
field boundary, Oriya Village, Mt. Abu. Note
the size of the plant.

R. Clinophylla proper (with two additional varieties) and *R. Lyelli*. In other words, according to this paper, *R. Clinophylla* in India, exists in three forms—*R. Clinophylla* itself, *R. Clinophylla* var. *parvifolia* (i. e. small leaved form) and *R. Clinophylla* var. *glabra* (i.e. hairless form but with larger leaves.) *R. Lyelli* is held to be a different species but from a horticulturist's point of view, the main differences are slight indeed, consisting mainly of the thorns pointing downward, as against the slightly upward pointing thorns in the *Clinophylla* group.

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We slowly retraced our steps and stopped at what we thought were likely places, i.e., by the side of streams and lakes, but could not find anything even remotely resembling a rose, even after covering a fair amount of ground. So, quite dejected we returned to the Forest Bungalow.

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